

Mothering Day: The Decisions

"Tuck and roll, Dianire. I'm letting you go...now!" Rintiala shouted over the noise of the hurricane winds that Berylia had added to her perverted living dream.

Dianire curled up as best she could, but she had been suspended her own body's height above the smoothly-raked white sand in at the entrance of Rintiala's new Healing Temple. Contact with the surface made her right shoulder nearly snap--she could hear the crunching of bone-on-bone within her--and white sand flew up in her face. Only the poncho given her by the Pregnant Virgin protected her from further harm. She spit sand out of her mouth, and coughed.

"Come on, Dianire, we've only got a few minutes before Berylia realizes we aren't frozen in fear," Rintiala commanded, grabbing her and pulling her up sharply by her left arm. "Goodness! You're heavy for someone so skinny."

Dianire rose to her feet, shaking off both the sand and Rintiala's helping hand. "What do we do now?"

"We use the Temple against Berylia," Rintiala said. "First thing, you've got to call back all your termites and attack the eighty-one Cactus Mothers that ring the Temple."

"Don't I need to be in a Cactus Mother to do that?"

"No, silly. You're in a living dream right now. Just think it, really really hard. We can't fight at Dragon Head and the Temple at the same time. Right now the Berylias around the Temple are half asleep, waiting for new orders from the first Berylia. Okay, that's enough explaining. Let's go." With that Rintiala ran to and through the main entrance, heading for the Great Altar.

Rintiala spoke over her shoulder as she ran. “Here's what I've learned—as far as it goes—and here's the pickle we are in.”

“As in pickled jalapenos?” Dianire asked, picking up speed, still shaking the sand out of her hair.

“No, more like pickled habaneras,” Rintiala continued. “The Birthing Mothers can hold a living Nueguan woman in suspension. They were designed this way in case a mother and baby might die at any moment.”

“But, that's a good thing, isn't it?” Dianire asked.

“Yes, out in the real world. But here, inside a living dream, if Berylia can pull this knowledge from me, she can poison both you and I with her perverted Mother Fruit, make us believe we are dead, and then place us in Birthing Mothers.”

“Is that possible?”

“Dianire Redourine, focus, please. Anything is possible in the Grotto, if the Pregant Virgin wills it. She told us that she won't interfere, whatever happens. Take this seriously. The living dream of the Grotto could become a living death. We might not wake up for a century, if at all.”

“Is Berylia that insane?” Dianire asked.

“Would you like to wait around and see?” Rintiala continued to scan the Great Altar. “Ah, there it is. That silver-and-tourquoise line, flowing back to the center of something.” She pointed into the depths of the Temple. “All is not lost. We've got weapons, too. The Great Altar is a living machine, designed to protect the Temple against intruders. But it requires two Nueguan women to operate it: one the brain, one the tail and talons. I'll handle the brain, which connects back to the Temple. That way, I can

coordinate our defense. All you have to do is kill and smash whatever comes through that front entrance.

“Rintiala, I don't have a clue what you are talking about,” Dianire complained.

“Words are slow, and crude,” Rintiala agreed. “Instead, I'm going to show you how the Great Altar can fight,” She took Dianire in her arms and kissed her full on the lips. In a rush, the knowledge of the mechanics of the Great Altar flowed into Dianire from Rintiala.

Rintiala broke contact first. “That's the first time today I've enjoyed myself,” she said, winking at the astonished Dianire.

Dianire wanted to express her doubts, but Rintiala put her left fingertips on Dianire's lips, while with her right first finger she traced the indigo lines that ran back to a central point at the base. “You need to go and sit on that lump, right there. It will fold itself around you, and your hands and feet will control all eight arms. The Great Altar is only as flexible as your imagination is, and I'm sure Berylia will come up with something nasty, so be ready for anything.”

Dianire did not jump up immediately to do Rintiala's bidding. “I think you're wrong. The Pregnant Virgin could stop all this if she really thought we were in trouble.”

“No,” Rintiala said emphatically, her eyes still scanning for something in the Great Temple “The Birthing Mothers are old, older than the Pregnant Virgin, and can override her. They come first in the structure; she is the last living machine built. She is all powerful within the Grotto, but the Birthing Mothers are outside of the Grotto, or underneath it you could say.”

Dianire grudgingly twisted her torso, and crawled to the lump at the base of the spine of the Great Altar. It began to hum and glow when she hunkered

down on it. Sure enough, it formed itself around her shins and forearms, leaving her feet and hands free. “Okay, I’m ready,” she said to Rintiala, who was no longer laying under the Great Altar.

“Dianire call all of your termite workers back to the Temple,” Rintiala's voice boomed off the roof.

“Where are you?” Dianire asked.

“Up here.” Rintiala was seated in a birthing position, legs up astride a bony structure that looked like two sets of arms, still in the processes of adapting to her form. A bony flower-and-stem was emerging, covering her right eye.

“Okay, Dianire, I'm ready. I can see the Berylia's marching this way. She's being followed by a dragon? No, she's created the biggest Cactus Mother ever; its tentacles are growing toward us. We can't stop that. Order your termite workers to regroup at the Temple, to kill all eighty-one of Berylia's Cactus Mothers. She's changed them; they now have now grown poisonous projectile thorns.”

A rustling, like the sound of cottonwoods in a high summer wind filled the entrance of the Healing Temple, and shadows overtook both Rintiala and Dianire. The battle had begun.

Rintiala's analysis was correct to a point. Berlyia did launched her attack on two fronts: one through the main entrance; the other however, came through the topmost arches of the Temple, gaining the high ground. Olive-green tentacles began to open to noxious orange blossoms, from which grew stinging thorns of hot fuschia

“Unleash your termites,” Rintiala commanded. Again it was as if she spoke directly into Dianire's ear.

Dianire had a different idea than Rintiala's. Instead of attacking Berylia's copies directly, she ordered her workers to flood Dragon Head with mud and silt. Dragon Head went under in flood of dirty water, killing all the Berylia's inside and around it. "Berylia, your backup is gone!" she shouted triumphantly

For a moment the tentacles climbing down from the roof stopped, as did the large central tentacle directly in front of the Great Altar.

"Nice try," Berylia's voice insinuated through the Temple. "But you've just killed half of your termites." Dianire realized the truth of this, too late.

"Dianire. Plan A, please," Rintiala said forcefully.

Dianire understood. She did not have enough resources to combat all of Berylia's multiple selves. For every termite soldier she created, Berylia would match it with a poisonous thorn. The only possible course of action was misdirection. Dianire brought up the arms of the Great Altar with their crablike joints, and locked them onto the single great tentacle, snipping it in half. In the same instant, while Berylia was focussing on growing more tentacles, she ordered her termite workers to destroy the eighty-one Cactus Mothers that ringed the Healing Temple.

Dianire fought on, sweeping away Berylia and her poisonous tentacles from the floor of the Temple. From the corner of her eye, she noticed that the structure of the roof was changing even as the Berylia's vines slithered across them, crushing many, but not all.

Neither defensive strategy was enough. Many Berylias had escaped the termite horde, climbing up the roof of the Healing Temple. They swept down from above, forcing Rintiala out of her seat on the Great Altar. Then they halted, and the tentacles that Dianire fought with sagged to the floor, lifeless.

Berylia demonstrated her command of the situation, All of her copies flowed to the center of the Healing Temple, while they fused back into herself. From her left index finger, a flower of noxious orange and olive green emerged. She positioned its poisonous thorn above Rintiala's left carotid artery, ready to strike the blow of living death.

"Yield, Dianire. I don't want to kill either of you, but I also can't have you interfering with my plans. With Clan Demetra plans." Berylia hissed.

Berylia's attention, split between Rintiala and Dianire, was insufficient to see the translucent threads growing together behind her. Dianire could see Berylia's overreaching mistake, even though she could do nothing about it. In a wink of an eye, these threads flowed over the poisoned thorn, tearing it from Berylia's flesh.

The silvery, translucent form of an athletic young woman leapt from the highest arch of the Healing Temple, with a trajectory punch to Berylia's heart, knocking her off the altar. The athlete opened her eyes and mouth wide, from which spidery webs flowed, covering the struggling Berylia. Though they seem insubstantial to Dianire, they lifted Berylia off the floor, and carried her back to a red-and-gold Training Mother rising out of the floor of the Temple, depositing her there, and closing its cover.

The athlete's form became more substantial until a woman of mature years, strong and svelte, stood before Rintiala and Dianire. Dianire could see a bit of every Clan in her: the strawberry blonde hair and violet eyes of Clan Tiala; the muscularity of Clan Redourine; the curvaceousness of Clan Demetra.

"I am Oldest Mother. I heard your call," she said to the two shocked girls.

"What is your Nueguan name?" Rintiala asked.

"I came before Nuegua. You could say I helped to build this place. My name

is Andrea Radford, and I was born in 2073, thirty-seven years before the war with the Sky Wanderers."

"Did you actually defeat them?" Dianire asked, recovering her composure.

"Not really. We just tricked them for a while. I've been waiting for you two for a long time. It's your task to defeat them."

"Us? We nearly got killed fighting one Clan Demetran!" Dianire objected.

"Enough information," Oldest Mother said. "Now, it is time to wake up," The image and voice of Andrea Radford, Oldest Sister of All Clans--one of the ancient creators of Nuegua--faded away.

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Dianire woke to find Berylia sitting up in her opened Training Mother, sobbing uncontrollably.

"I had terrible nightmares," Berylia choked out between sobs and sniffles.

Dianire's vision blurred for a moment. She saw an older, filled-out version of herself walking up to Berylia's Training Mother. "No you did not," this older Dianire said. "You saw your potential. You saw the truth about yourself, and so did all the Healing Sisters in the Temple."

This older version turned to Dianire. "So you're awake? You don't look all that awake."

"But how can I be here and be you at the same time?" Dianire asked, feeling very light headed.

"Oh, snap out of it. It's me, Tianara. I'm your older sister, remember?"

"Okay, okay," Dianire complained. "All I care about is: where is Rintiala?"

First Sister Alatheia came walking up behind Tianara. "Rintiala has yet to awaken, but her dreaming-signs are normal, not to worry."

"Tianara, how did you get here so quickly?" Dianire asked.

"Quickly?" Tianara threw her head back and laughed. "Dianire Redourine, my trouble-making sister, you have been in the Training Mother for three days. I came as fast as I could from the far south-east. There's been Western Bandit trouble down there."

"I called both First Sister Tianara and the First Sister of Clan Demetra to the Healing Temple when it was clear that something had gone wrong with your Mothering." Alatheia said. "We have reviewed the evidence from all three of your living dreams and have come to our decision, which we will deliver as soon as Rintiala awakens."

As if on cue, the outer shells of Rintiala's Training Mother split apart, revealing a Rintiala on a cushion, her strawberry-blonde hair spread out like wings. "I heard lots of mumbling, so I thought it was time to wake up. Did I miss anything?"

Dianire vaulted over to Rintiala, placing her left ear over Rintiala's heart. "After all we've been through, you have to make an entrance like that," Dianire said softly.

Rintiala tucked in her chin to get a better look at Dianire. "And I'm glad to see you. And Mother? And First Sister Tianara? I'm sorry, but I don't know your name, First Sister of Clan Demetra."

The First Sister of Clan Demetra was much older in appearance than the other two First Sisters. Streaks of grey ran from the temples of her hair, all the way down her back. She had the fiercest steel-gray eyes that Dianire had ever seen. Her mouth was set in a permanent grimace. "Just First Sister will do, young Healer. I don't plan to be here long."

Alathea took command of the conversation. "We First Sisters have a set of difficult problems to solve with you three. The first problem is that the Pregnant Virgin has decided that you are now Mothered. Do you understand what this means?"

Rintiala spoke first. "We can heal any disease with a touch."

"Poetic but somewhat accurate. In the presence of a dangerous disease, your body will secrete the antidote, primarily through your breast milk. All you have begun to lactate, though with stress you have been through, you might not notice it yet."

"But we're just girls! At least Dianire and I are," Rintiala objected.

"Not any more, my daughter. Mothering is permanent. Do any of you know the second power--the second problem--that Mothering bequeaths you?"

Dianire thought that Alathea was just reciting something out of a book now. "Of course I do. All three of us will live to be two hundred years old. We will grow up normally until we are twenty, then change will occur, and we will not turn twenty-one until we are eighty years old."

"Very good," Tianara replied. "I see that you do occasionally pay attention when I try to train you."

"And the third? Do any of you understand why this is our biggest problem?" Alathea asked, looking directly at Berylia.

"Our dreams can become our deeds," she answered, tears still drying on her face.

"We Firsts cannot take this last power away from you, nor can the Pregnant Virgin rescind her Mothering. Each of you must make a choice, then. Rintiala of Clan Tiala, we three Firsts have decided you can enter the Guild of your choice. Which do you choose?" Alatheia looked at her daughter, her concern evident in her furrowed brows.

"Mother, Sisters...I choose the Healer's Guild." Rintiala answered solemnly.

"And you, Dianire, you can choose any of the three Guilds. Which do you choose?" Tianara asked her sister.

"I choose to be a Builder. I'm just not comfortable in the Grotto of the Pregnant Virgin. Let me live out in the open, building things."

"So? All this for nothing?" Alatheia asked incredulously.

"Nothing? No, Rintiala showed me that I can do things no other Builder can do. That's why I want to be a Builder." Dianire said proudly.

All three of the Firsts turned to Berylia. "Berylia of Clan Demetra, in your living dream you attempted to murder two of your fellow Nueguans, and prospective Sisters. Had you done this in the flesh, your punishment would be swift and sure. But since you did no lasting harm to Rintiala or Dianire, it is decided that you may not enter any of the three Guilds, nor may you use a Cactus Mother again."

"You will be made a Servant of the Guild," First Sister of Clan Demetra said to her softly. "It is for the best." Berylia took in a deep breath and held it silently before she answered.

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!" Berylia screamed at the top of her lungs.

Tianara spoke next. "In your dreams, you made it clear that Clan Demetra plans to create an addictive Mother Fruit, to enslave all who eat of it. Worse, you made it clear that Clan Demetran women will have indiscriminant sex with all the men in Empty Earth after these men have eaten of this perverted fruit. All the Healing Sisters witnessed your dream from all three perspectives, and they have judged this to be true."

"You made me do this!" Berylia shouted at First Sister of Clan Demetra. "It is your plan, not mine!"

"There is no proof of any such plot, nor would I condone such a thing," First Sister of Clan Demetra said to Alatheia and Tianara. "Berylia descended into madness, and I am willing to admit that was my fault. She is too old to be Mothered, but she would not stop petitioning me, so I let her try. I assumed that the Pregnant Virgin would reject her as soon as the Living Dream of the Grotto commenced, but that was not to be. For this indulgence, I am deeply sorry to all," she said, bowing deeply to the other Firsts. She looked at Berylia silently, while her fists clenched and unclenched. "Bath yourself, and pack your things. We leave for Village Demetra within the hour. Speak to no Healer or Builder while we leave."

With that, First Sister of Clan Demetra helped the shivering Berylia out of the Training Mother, and walked beside her, holding her gently. When they reached the doorway, golden in the afternoon light, Berylia turned and stared at Rintiala and Dianire in a way Dianire could not fathom, but she felt ants crawl up and down her spine. Then the Demetrans were gone.

Alatheia looked at her daughter and sighed. "This was not the Mothering Day I expected, not at all." She put her thumb to her lips, cogitating. "Still...there is a large group of people waiting outside for you two, and we can't mill around here much longer without missing supper. So come girls, let's eat."

"You're going to let Clan Redourine eat as much as they like? Goodness, there will be nothing left over for tomorrow," Tianara said, laughing. "Come my new younger Sister, let's see what they are serving. I hear it is roast emu, with all the dressings."

Dianire helped Rintiala out her Training Mother, while Alatheia prepared for her daughter a robe of purest white, the dress of a Healing Novice. "Fits quite well, I think," Alatheia said, smiling for the first time.

"I apologize for my behaviour when we first met," Dianire said to Rintiala. "You can call me Dee from now on, now that we are friends."

"Is that what we are?" Rintiala said smiling. "Now, you can call me Rinnie."

In the late afternoon of Village Tiala, home of the Healer's Guild, three young women left the entrance of the Healing Temple entrance together; two of them arm-in-arm, smiling and waving at family and friends. The third, the small one, waited until the first two had moved on with their party, and slunk off the premises, her eyes filled with a fire of unquenchable fury.